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<https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2017.1405325>

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# **Passing the buck? Responsibility attribution and cognitive bias in multilevel democracies**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the effect of national partisanship and Euroscepticism on individuals' causal responsibility attribution in European multilevel democracies. It is particularly focused on the average differences in responsibility attribution in federal and non-federal states, as well as in countries belonging to different European Union enlargement waves. Using a pooled dataset of the 2004, 2009, and 2014 European Election Studies, results show that when poor economic outcomes are at stake, partisans of the national incumbent in federal states are more likely to assign responsibility to regional governments following a blame-attribution logic, while this logic is absent in non-federal states. Likewise, Eurosceptic individuals are more likely to assign responsibility to European authorities when they hold negative views of the economy and they belong to countries that have been European Union members for a longer period.

One of the most celebrated virtues of multilevel systems is better democratic governance. Indeed, classical normative theories state that multilevel governance helps to allocate power more efficiently to the most relevant level and enhance the control of governments by bringing them closer to citizens and overcoming informational asymmetries between representatives and represented. However, a more critical view stresses that vertical fragmentation of power makes the latter unable to establish a causal link between incumbents' performance and outcomes, hampering their capacity to assign responsibilities. From this perspective, the peril of multilevel governance lies in that it makes voters less capable of attributing responsibility, weakening the reward-punishment model and, in turn, electoral accountability.

Certainly, individuals' capacity to assign responsibility between levels of government lies at the heart of the accountability mechanism of the reward-punishment model (Cutler 2004, 2008; Däubler et al. 2017). In this paper, the goal is to advance research on responsibility attribution by exploring responsibility judgements in multilevel systems. Building upon the political science literature on retrospective accountability and the social psychology literature on cognitive bias, the paper explores the role of party identification and attitudes towards the European Union in individuals' responsibility assignments, and tests for variation in this effect between different institutional contexts. In essence, the specific research questions are namely two: do group-serving biases in responsibility operate more intensely in multilevel systems than in countries with a unitary form of government? Do they operate more prominently in contexts where levels of governments are more consolidated?

This paper provides new theoretical and empirical insights into the role of cognitive biases in responsibility attribution, with a particular focus in the variation between different institutional contexts. The first hypothesis assumes that multilevel

governance activates the use of cognitive bias in responsibility attribution, and thus, it expects in-group bias – namely partisanship – to be more intensely used in countries where domestic powers are more vertically fragmented, that is, federations. The second hypothesis states that individuals' attitudes towards Europe operate more prominently as a group serving bias in countries with an older EU membership, that is, in countries where EU institutions are more consolidated, and thus, become more visible targets for strategic attribution. These arguments are tested using a virtually unexplored set of questions in the European Election Studies' (EES) Voter Studies. The EES platform has regularly asked Europeans about the level of government (regional, national, or European) that is responsible for the 'most important problem' (MIP) in their countries.

The theoretical grounds of the paper contribute to bridge two strands of the literature on responsibility attribution that so far have rarely spoken to each other, namely the aggregate-level institutional literature on clarity of responsibility and the individual-based social-psychology approach on cognitive bias (Hobolt and Tilley 2014: 13). It does so by advancing some theoretical arguments into the relationship between institutional conditions and the use of partisanship and attitudes towards the European Union in moderating individuals' responsibility judgements. Second, it provides new empirical insights into the responsibility attribution research by exploring the possible existence of selective attribution of responsibility in a representative sample of individuals across European Union member countries.

The article is organized as follows. In the next section the main theoretical implications of a model of endogenous responsibility attribution are presented, developing the arguments alongside the main findings in the literature. After that, there is a discussion of the data and methods, underscoring the existing data opportunity and the limits in the operationalization of responsibility attribution. Then, empirical results

are presented, concluding with a summary of the findings and some remarks on future research paths.

### **Endogenous responsibility attribution in multilevel contexts**

The classical normative literature on fiscal federalism assumes that when countries are decentralized, voters will be more capable to hold governments accountable, and, as a consequence, governments' capacity to act in a fiscally irresponsible way will be constrained. By placing subnational governments in competition with one another, fiscal federalism provides subnational governments with incentives to enhance control of the public economy (Brennan and Buchanan 1980; Qian and Weingast 1997). Yet, fiscal federalism models are of an ideal type (Oates *et al.* 1972): they envision highly autonomous subnational governments and a clear separation of powers between layers of government. These characteristics, however, are a far cry from the actual distribution of authority in decentralized systems.

Federalism often means shared authority across levels of government (Rodden 2006) and constitutions can be seen as 'incomplete contracts' where the precise delineation of powers is not clearly defined (Riker 1964). By blurring lines of responsibility and increasing information costs, responsibility attribution may become a daunting task in multilevel states and politicians may take advantage of these structures, blaming other levels of government when poor performance is at stake or taking credit when things go well (McGraw 1990; McGraw *et al.* 1993; Weaver 1986). Hence, assuming that clarity of responsibility is the key mechanism that makes electoral

accountability work (Ferejohn 1986), federal arrangements may actually weaken the role of elections as an effective mechanism to control governments.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of clarity of responsibility refers to the institutional characteristics that affect the ability of citizens to make governments accountable for policy outcomes. This concept has its origins in the path-breaking work of Powell and Whitten (1993), who showed that the degree of cohesiveness and visibility of governing institutions measured as a ‘clarity of responsibility index’ (number of parties in government, party cohesion, presence of bicameral opposition minority governments, strong committee system or federalism) significantly modifies the impact of the economy on electoral support for incumbent parties.<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding the inclusion of federalism in the aforementioned index, its focus is secondary in this literature, and thus, the specific consideration of the effects of vertical division of powers on responsibility attribution and accountability have been barely explored from a comparative perspective. An exception to this is the work of Anderson (2006), who showed that economic voting in federal states is weaker than in unitary ones. The causal mechanism of that empirical relationship is federalism undermining individuals’ ability to administer political sanctions on the basis of economic or policy evaluations (2006: 451). Yet Anderson does not empirically test for the mechanism, so it still remains unclear how citizens try to overcome the informational costs that federal institutions impose. Arceneaux states that informational

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<sup>1</sup> Accountability is an electoral mechanism that citizens use to hold politicians responsible for the outcomes derived from their past actions (Przeworski *et al.* 1999). This requires that there is clarity of responsibility (Ferejohn 1986; Royed *et al.* 2000).

<sup>2</sup> See Leyden and Borrelli (1995), Royed *et al.* (2000), Lowry, Alt and Ferree (1998), Anderson (2000), Duch and Stevenson (2008), Fisher and Hobolt (2010). Whitten and Palmer (1999), De Vries, Edwards and Tillman (2011). Hobolt, Tilley and Banducci’s (2013) recent contribution differentiates between the institutional and government clarity of responsibility, and argue that the latter has a stronger impact on voters’ ability to hold governments accountable.

costs make voters assign responsibility randomly ‘in an erratic fashion, muting electoral accountability’ (2006: 732), although his argument may only be capturing part of voters’ reaction to complex institutional settings.

This paper develops a complementary argument that focuses on the institutional/informational and social psychological components of citizens’ responsibility assignments. To that end, following conventional wisdom on the effect of in-group attachments on individuals’ attitudes, it is argued that, in their search for decision-making efficiency, citizens will tend to overcome limited information about who does what by turning to simple cues (Angus *et al.* 1960; Bartels 2000, Huckfeldt *et al.* 1999), such as party identification or national identity. As it follows, when confronted with the task of assigning responsibility, individuals in multilevel democracies may resort more frequently to in-group rationalizations. However, as Hobolt and Tilley (2014) emphasize, while partisanship and other in-group attachments may serve as a useful heuristic for, say, vote choice in elections and referendums, they can also lead to attribution error in multilevel systems, especially when individuals lack political information.

Indeed, social psychologists have long argued that the way individuals assign responsibility is marked by a number of errors and biases (Fiske and Taylor 2007). Works in the area have shown that individuals’ responsibility assignments also operate in a selective manner defined as ‘group-serving’ bias: individuals tend to claim credit for the group with which they feel more closely identified, whereas they blame other groups (out-groups) for failures (Taylor and Doria 1981; Taylor and Jaggi 1974). Relevant group identities can be based on strong group traits, such as race or ethnicity (see Taylor and Jaggi 1974), or looser ones, such as being a member of a sport-team (Taylor and Doria 1981). Although partisanship may not qualify as a strong-group



identity, political science research has shown that, for instance, ideological closeness to the incumbent party may neutralize the impact of government performance on vote, a cognitive process defined as ‘selective sanctioning’ (Tilley and Hobolt 2011: 317). Party rationalizations have a strong effect on responsibility judgments, as well. This mechanism has been defined as ‘selective attribution’: partisans tend to attribute successes to their preferred party whereas tend to exonerate them for poor performance (Arceneaux 2006; Cutler 2008; Malhotra and Kuo 2008; Marsh and Tilley 2010; Rudolph 2003a, 2003b). In a similar logic, Hobolt and Tilley (2014) also show that people’s feelings about the European Union may act as a cognitive bias in responsibility attribution in a comparable manner as partisanship does. They find evidence that individuals who feel more closely attached to the EU tend to credit it more when things go well, whereas those who dislike the EU tend to blame it more when things go badly (ibid. p.54).<sup>3</sup> Similarly to the aforementioned literature on in-group biases, the literature has not explored whether individual’s feelings about the European Union operate more strongly in some EU countries than others when moderating attribution of responsibility.

Therefore, the focus of the paper is on the role of both 1) partisanship and 2) individuals’ attachment to the EU as perceptual screens that filter individuals’ responsibility assignments in multilevel systems. The hypotheses complement previous literature by connecting in-group bias to institutional characteristics. On the one hand, building upon recent theoretical contributions in the area (León and Orriols 2016), this paper argues that federal institutions will activate the use of cognitive bias in responsibility attribution, accordingly expecting partisanship to be more intensely used

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<sup>3</sup> Hobolt and Tilley (2014) also use EES data in their analysis; specifically, the 2009 Voter Study questions on the attribution of responsibility to national governments and to the European Union for five different policy domains.

in countries where powers are nationally vertically fragmented. Two are the mechanisms whereby federalism may activate the role of cognitive bias in responsibility assignment: informational challenges and opportunity structures (León and Orriols 2016). The first mechanism (information) is about how individuals use mental shortcuts (heuristics), such as partisanship or identity, to assign responsibility; the more difficult it is for voters to ascertain who is responsible for what, the more likely it is they will use party affiliation or identity to attribute credit and blame for policy outcomes. This argument speaks to the very few studies that explore the role of contextual conditions in the use of cognitive heuristics, which show that in ‘low information’ contexts shortcuts are more intensely employed by voters (Brown 2010; Cutler 2004, 2008; Lau and Redlawsk 2001; McDermott 1997).<sup>4</sup> The second mechanism has to do with how federalism creates an opportunity for individuals to engage in an attribution game, fundamentally by increasing the number of relevant political actors (regional governments) to whom blame and credit might be attributed. Put it differently, the vertical fragmentation of powers paves the way for ‘in-group’ bias, since ‘favouring ones’ group may become easier when there are more potential “out-groups” to which failure can be attributed’ (León and Orriols 2016)<sup>5</sup>.

On the other hand, following upon the opportunity structure argument (see also Lees 2008; Wilson and Hobolt 2015), this paper states that individuals’ feelings about the European Union will have a stronger moderating role on responsibility assignments in countries where European institutions are more consolidated. The underlying argument is that a political group becomes more ‘blameable’ or ‘creditable’ the more

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<sup>4</sup> A similar argument is used by Rohrschneider, Rüdiger Schmitt-Beck, and Franziska to explain why economic voting in the German general election of 2009 was weaker than in other European countries (quoted in Bermeo and Bartels (2014: 205)).

<sup>5</sup> For an assessment of blame-shifting between politicians, see Hartung and Tosung (2017)

salient it is for individuals. The assumption is that European institutions will be more consolidated and visible for individuals in those countries that have been members of the EU for a longer period. Consolidated institutions are more likely to become a target for individuals' strategic responsibility attribution than institutions that are less entrenched. Accordingly, the expectation is that individuals' feelings about the EU will affect responsibility attribution more intensely in countries with older EU membership.

In summary, partisanship should have a stronger moderating role in the assignment of responsibility in federal countries than in non-federal countries (H1). Likewise, individual attitudes towards the EU should have a stronger moderating role in the assignment of responsibility in countries that have belonged to the EU for a longer period (H2).

## **Data and methods**

The European Elections Studies (EES) platform has ever since 1999 European Parliament election asked respondents in its Voter Study to identify the perceived main responsible level of government for the 'most important problem' (MIP) in their countries at the time of the question<sup>6</sup>. To our best knowledge, this question represents the only available measure of multilevel attribution of responsibility in various countries over several years.<sup>7</sup> Respondents – in a representative sample of European member states – are first requested to state which is the most important problem that their

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<sup>6</sup> MIP responses have regularly been used in literature to characterize individual, as well as aggregate-level public attention to issues, concerns, or problem status at particular points in time and over time (Heffington *et al.* 2017; Jennings and Wlezien 2011; Jones 1994; Jones and Baumgartner 2004; MacKuen and Coombs 1981; McCombs and Shaw 1972). MIPs have also been used as proxies for policy preferences (for example, Hobolt and Klemmensen 2008; John 2006) although some scholars state that MIPs and spending preferences tap very different things (Jennings and Wlezien 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Despite the evident data opportunity that these questions present, only few studies have specifically cited their use, mainly for descriptive purposes focused on normative approaches to the role of the European Union (De Winter and Swyngedouw 1999).

countries face.<sup>8</sup> Then, they are subsequently asked to attribute its responsibility to either the regional, the national, or the European level of government,<sup>9</sup> regardless of the level of territorial distribution of power in their countries.<sup>10</sup>

There is, however, a caveat related to the limits of measuring responsibility attribution through the ‘most important problem’ question, as it is a question that can be capturing different types of responsibility attribution. As Rudolph (2006) and Hobolt and Tilley (2014: 10) note, responsibility attribution has different components. One is functional, which measures the formal (constitutional) allocation of responsibility between levels of government for matters in a policy area. Individuals expect governments to serve in those areas they are responsible for. For example, in most of federal states subnational governments have responsibility for education or healthcare, whereas the federal government has responsibility for defence or monetary policy. The second component of responsibility attribution is causal responsibility, which involves the retrospective assignment of blame or credit for the conditions in a particular policy area. Governments are assigned responsibility for having caused a policy outcome through their actions or inactions. As Hobolt and Tilley (2014) recognize, causal and functional responsibility are closely related. Rudolph (2006) adds a third component, that is, the desired responsibility to do something in a given policy domain – meaning that citizens wish a particular level of government to act in that specific area –. These three types of responsibility – *causal*, *functional*, and *desired* – may be conflated in our operationalization of responsibility attribution through the mentioned question in the

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<sup>8</sup> Questions are open-ended with the verbatim later recoded by issue in the 2009 and 2014 waves. In 2004, the question had a list of problems that respondents could choose from.

<sup>9</sup> Specific question wording through waves: ‘*As of today, is (the most important problem) mainly dealt with by regional, national, or European political authorities?*’ (2004 and 2009) and ‘*As of today, at which level do you think (the most important problem) is dealt with?*’ (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Descriptive statistics on the distribution of our dependent variable by institutional context are provided in the online appendix.

EES. As the goal of the paper is to analyse the role of in-group attachments when attributing responsibility for policy outcomes (*causal responsibility*), the attempt is to control for other types of responsibility (functional and desired) via some of our explanatory variables, as it is developed below.

We have pooled EES data for 2004, 2009 and 2014<sup>11</sup> into a single database<sup>12</sup> and organized the empirical analysis in two sections, each one testing one of the hypotheses.<sup>13</sup> The dependent variable is the attribution of responsibility for the ‘most important problem’ to three mutually exclusive levels of authority: the European Union, national or regional authorities. The analysis explores how partisanship and European identity shape the attribution of responsibility to these three levels in different contexts. *Partisanship* is operationalized through party identification, a dummy variable that is coded as 1 when respondents feel close to the national incumbent party (operationalized as the prime minister’s party) and 0 otherwise.<sup>14</sup> People’s feelings about the European Union are operationalized with a dummy variable labelled *Eurosceptic* that takes the value of 1 for those who consider their countries’ membership of the European Union to be a ‘bad thing’ or are indifferent about it and 0 for those that consider it positive.

In order to measure causal responsibility (responsibility for policy outcomes), we need to link responsibility to the conditions of a particular policy area. Note that ‘the

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11 We do not include 1999 because of the lack of retrospective economic evaluations.

12 Countries and years included are the following: Austria, Belgium, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Greece, Finland, France, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, and United Kingdom are in the three waves (2004, 2009, and 2014). We also have data for Bulgaria, Romania, and Malta in the 2009 and 2014 waves, and for Croatia in the 2014 wave.

13 For the sake of the robustness of our results, we estimated our empirical models twice: first, we limited our dependent variable to those respondents mentioning economic MIPs, and later on we re-estimated them including any mentioned problem. Since the magnitude and significance of our results hold to a large extent, we have decided to report only the latter, though the former are accessible in our online appendix.

14 ‘Do you consider yourself to be close to any particular political party?’ 1 is coded as support to the Prime Minister’s party. 0 refers to any other mentioned political party or lack of identification with any party.

most important problem’ is a too broad statement to allow for any inference about: a) the specific policy individuals are assigning responsibility for; and b) their evaluation of outcomes in that policy domain. Given that 60% of the ‘most important problems’ identified by respondents in the sample are directly or indirectly related to the economy<sup>15</sup>, policy outcomes are operationalized using retrospective evaluations of the economy (1 for those who think that the economy has become ‘much worse’ or ‘little worse’ and 0 for the rest (stayed the same, little better and much better)). The idea is to capture whether the impact of partisanship and support to the EU changes responsibility attribution according to the positive or negative evaluations of the economy. Positive evaluations of economic outcomes may result in an over-attribution of responsibility to the in-group (national government for partisans and Eurosceptic citizens) whereas negative evaluations may result in exonerative strategies (blaming out-groups). Therefore, the interest is in the interaction between retrospective evaluations of the economy and the in-groups of interest in this paper (national incumbent partisans and Eurosceptics).

We employ multinomial logistic regressions with standard errors clustered by member country. In all models the reference category is the *national level*. Multinomial logistic coefficients for choosing different levels should thus be interpreted relative to the probability of assigning responsibility to the national authorities.

A set of controls are also included in an attempt to isolate causal responsibility from functional responsibility and desired responsibility. First, we account for respondents’ general levels of information about politics (*informed*). Previous evidence

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15 Economic issues can be defined narrowly to include macroeconomic concerns, e.g. ‘inflation’, ‘unemployment’, ‘debt’, ‘the economy conditions’, and the like. Those represent the 43.26% of the MIPs mentioned by respondents for the whole period in our sample. If we include distributional economic problems (wages and taxes) within the category, this percentage goes up to 59.86 (Marsh and Tilley 2010; Wlezien 2005,).

shows that more knowledgeable voters discern better the existing constitutional distribution of powers between levels of government (Anderson 2008; León 2012; Tilley and Hobolt 2011). This variable is operationalized taking into account how closely the respondent followed the elections by combining the answers on how often he/she followed the elections through the television, newspapers, internet, attended public meetings, and discussed the election with family and friends.<sup>16</sup> Respondents level of *education* is also controlled.<sup>17</sup> This should capture variation across individuals in their capacity to assign *functional* responsibility, as more informed and educated voters should be able to discern better the responsible level of government in different policy areas. Second, *desired* responsibility assignments are taken into account by introducing a variable which measures the level of government that individuals think that *should deal with the mentioned 'most important problem'*.<sup>18</sup> The reference category is the national level.

To test whether the role of in-group bias is more intense in multilevel states (H1) there is a dummy variable *-federal-* that is coded as 1 in federal countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, and Spain) and 0 in non-federal states. To test whether people's feelings about the EU has a stronger moderating role in older EU member states there is a dummy variable, *old EU membership*, that is coded as 1 for countries that accessed the EU before 2004 and 0 for countries that accessed the EU afterwards.

Finally, sociodemographic controls are introduced, namely age and gender. These variables have no substantive theoretical implications for the purpose of this

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16 By adding all these variables, we have an index that ranges from 0 to 15.

17 Education is an ordinal variable that takes the value of 0 for respondents with 0 to 15 years of education, 1 for respondents with 16 to 19 years, and 2 for those with 20 or more years.

18 '*And who do you think would be most appropriate to deal with (the most important problem): regional, national, or European political authorities?*' (2004 and 2009) and '*And at which level do you think (the most important problem) should be dealt with?*' (2014).

paper, and thus, they are not included in the reported tables. All models are estimated using year fixed-effects.

## Results

Table 1 displays a first set of results without any institutional variables. In Model 1.1, there is a test of the general impact of causal responsibility, that is, the effect of negative retrospective evaluations of the economy upon responsibility attribution. Results show that there is no significant effect of retrospective economic evaluations upon individuals' responsibility judgements. Worse retrospective evaluations do not lead to blame a particular level of government. There is, however, an important effect of the desired responsibility attribution on responsibility assignments. The sign of the coefficients in the '*who should*' variable indicates that individuals tend to assign responsibility to the level of government they would prefer to be dealing with the 'most important problem'. This is a strong effect, of a relevant magnitude and consistent across models.

Models 1.2 and 1.3 test whether causal responsibility is mediated through 'in-group' biases by interacting retrospective evaluations with *National Incumbent Partisans* (Model 1.2) and *Eurosceptics* (Model 1.3). Results for partisanship (Model 1.2) show that the worse the economic evaluation the more likely it is that national incumbent partisans assign responsibility to the European and regional levels. This result already indicates that in-group biases might be a relevant driver of responsibility attribution, although the magnitude of the coefficient is not significantly different from zero.

Model 1.3 shows that Euroscepticism moderates significantly the impact of economic conditions upon responsibility attribution: those who do not perceive that their country's EU membership is something positive, are more likely to assign



responsibility to European institutions (relative to the national government) when they have a poor evaluation of economic conditions than the Europhile voters.<sup>19</sup>

In summary, results in Table 1 provide some evidence of in-group bias in responsibility attribution, although the effect only appears to be significant for Eurosceptics. Next section provides an analysis on whether the impact of in-group bias in responsibility assignments varies across institutional contexts.

(TABLE 1 HERE)

### ***Testing for partisan bias in federal and non-federal states (H1)***

In order to test for the first theoretical expectation, the sample is split in two: federal countries (Model 2.1, Table 2) and non-federal countries (Model 2.2, Table 2). Replicating previous models for both groups, results show that the interaction between partisanship and negative evaluations of the economy have a significant effect in federal states but not in non-federal ones. Put it differently, in federal states individuals who hold poor economic evaluations of the economy and feel identified with the national incumbent party are more likely to ascribe responsibility to the regional or the European level of government. This evidence would correspond to a blame-avoiding logic, and thus, would confirm our prediction in Hypothesis 1.

(TABLE 2 HERE)

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<sup>19</sup> The interaction coefficient for the regional category shows that Eurosceptics are also less likely to assign responsibility to the regional government (relative to the national government) when they show poor evaluations of the economy.

Figure 1 summarizes the main results of Table 2. It plots the effect of bad economic assessments on the probability to attribute responsibilities to the regional government for national incumbent partisans and the rest of voters both in federal and non-federal countries. On the left-hand side of the figure it can be seen that there are almost no differences between partisan voters and the rest in non-federal countries. The coefficient, if something, is significant at the 90% level for the voters that are not close to the national incumbent, which slightly attribute less responsibility to the regional government (and, consequently, more to the national government) when the economy goes bad. The real differences between partisans and the rest emerge in federal countries, where regional governments are more autonomous and salient, and thus, become a credible ‘blameable’ actor. In this institutional setting, worse economic assessments lead to more attribution of responsibility to regional governments by partisans of the national incumbent, allowing them to exonerate their preferred party the national office for the bad economic results. The effect is quite large as the probability to attribute responsibility to the regional government increases in almost 50%. No significance, however, is found for the rest of voters.

[FIGURE 1]

To provide a further robustness check of Hypothesis 1 we interact partisanship and the federal dummy and split the sample in two, distinguishing between individuals that hold negative evaluations of the economy (Model 3.1, Table 3) and individuals who do not hold negative economic evaluations (Model 3.2, Table 3)<sup>20</sup>. In other words, we explore whether ‘pessimistic’ partisans on economic conditions are more likely to

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<sup>20</sup> We use this strategy instead of a triple interaction for the sake of parsimony.

assign responsibility (blame) to the out-groups (regional and European authorities) in federal democracies than in non-federal ones.<sup>21</sup> Results are exhibited in Table 3 and corroborate the existence of an attribution pattern that corresponds to a blame-avoidance logic: partisans who hold negative evaluations of the economy are more likely to shift more responsibility to their less preferred authorities in federal states than in non-federal ones.

Altogether, these results confirm the hypothesis that in-group bias is more likely to be activated when the institutional setting open opportunities for blame. National incumbent partisans are more likely to attribute responsibility for bad economic outcomes to regional governments only if the institutional setting increases the number of ‘out-groups’ (in this case, regional governments) that can be credibly blamed.

(TABLE 3 HERE)

Finally, a more nuanced account of the effect of partisanship in responsibility assignments in federal states is provided. In Table 4, we take into account the possibility that the effect of partisanship may vary across regions depending on whether or not regional governments are ruled by the same party that rules the national government. Partisanship is expected to moderate blame attribution more strongly when national and regional governments are ruled by different parties; in these situations, partisans can identify the regional government as a clear-cut ‘out-group’ to put the blame on.

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<sup>21</sup> The wording of the question is ‘*What do you think about the economy? Compared to 12 months ago, do you think that the general economic situation in [country]*’: 1 = a lot better; 2 = a little better; 3 = stayed the same; 4 = a little worse; 5 = a lot worse.

There is data available on the region of residence of the EES respondents for some of the federal and quasi-federal countries in the sample.<sup>22</sup> Specifically, for Austria (2009 and 2014), Germany (2009 and 2014), Spain (2014), Italy (2014) and the two devolved regions of the United Kingdom, Scotland and Wales (2009 and 2014). We have created a variable named *Non-Affiliated*, which is coded as 1 when the region is ruled by a different party than the one that rules the national government and 0 otherwise. The basic model of the paper is replicated, now interacting non-affiliated regions with partisanship. Results show that blame attribution is more predominant in non-affiliated regions. In other words, national incumbent partisans tend to significantly assign more responsibility to regional governments when the latter are not ruled by their preferred party.

[TABLE 4]

Figure 2 shows this graphically. The observed effects at the national level are mostly driven by partisans of the national incumbent in non-affiliated regions. It is in these regions where they can safely blame regional governments following their national partisan preferences. This is consistent with the blame-attribution mechanism activated in multilevel settings that has been both theoretically and empirically described above.

[FIGURE 2]

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<sup>22</sup> The region of residence is not systematically coded for individuals from all countries in all waves.

### ***Testing for the Eurosceptic bias (H2)***

So far, the idea of how federal institutions open opportunities for partisan voters to blame regional governments for bad economic performance has been tested. Next, the outward-looking blame attribution of Eurosceptic voters is explored. The argument is that in those cases in which European multi-level structures are more established, Eurosceptic voters will be more likely to blame Europe for bad economic outcomes.<sup>23</sup> To test for H2, we split sample in two groups: the old EU members (all countries that joined before 2004) and the new EU members, which consist of all countries that joined the EU after the 2004 enlargement or later. The same procedure developed to test H1 is replicated here.

[TABLE 5 HERE]

Results in Table 5 shows that the general results found in Table 1 are in fact driven by the oldest EU member countries. Table 1 showed that Eurosceptic voters blame the European level when they perceive that there has been a bad economic performance in their country. When the sample is split into old and new EU members, this result only holds for the old EU members. In those countries where the European level of government is more visible and settled, as the country has been in the EU for longer, Eurosceptic voters are more likely to blame this level for bad economic outcomes. However, in the new EU countries, where the EU has been present for a shorter period of time, anti-EU voters do not strategically allocate responsibility to the European level in the presence of bad economic evaluations.

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<sup>23</sup> The percentage of Eurosceptics is slightly higher in new EU member countries (46.9) than in older ones (42.4).

The results of hypothesis 2 are summarized in Figure 3. The figure shows a comparison between the effect of bad economic assessments on the probability to attribute responsibility to the European level for Eurosceptic and Europhile citizens both in the old EU member states and the newest members of the EU (those joining in 2004 or later). As it can be observed, in those countries where EU authorities have had a role for a longer period there are very relevant differences between Eurosceptic and Europhile voters. When Eurosceptic voters have worse economic assessments, they attribute more responsibility to the European levels (around 10% more likely to do this). Conversely, Europhile voters are less likely to attribute responsibility to the European level in the presence of worse economic assessments, exonerating it for bad outcomes. The differences are significant and show that there is a completely opposed understanding and rationalization process. These differences, however, fade away among younger EU members. Although the direction of the effects is similar, there are no significant differences in the probability of attributing or exonerating responsibility to Europe conditional on the European identity.

[FIGURE 3]

As a robustness check, in Table 6 the analysis is replicated, splitting now the sample between those that hold negative evaluations of the economy (Model 6.1) and individuals who do not hold these economic evaluations (Model 6.2). In each model, we analyse whether Eurosceptic voters of old EU countries are more likely to attribute blame to the EU than those from new EU countries. The results, again, confirm the main findings. This time, however, the interaction between old EU country and

Eurosceptic voter is significant in both models. In other words, Eurosceptic voters in old EU countries would seem to be always more likely to attribute blame to the European level than similar voters in new EU countries. The magnitude of the effect, however, is much larger when they hold negative economic evaluations, indicating that the Eurosceptic bias is stronger when individual need to make causal attributions of blame.

### **Summary and concluding remarks**

This paper has explored the impact of individuals' party identification and Euroscepticism upon responsibility judgements, and tested for variation of this effect across different institutional settings. Using a pooled dataset of the European Election Survey Voter Study for 2004, 2009 and 2014 in 28 European Union member countries, two are the main results of this paper.

First, results show that partisanship has a stronger moderating role of responsibility assignments in federal countries than in non-federal ones. In federal states, national incumbent partisans show assignments of responsibility that correspond to a blame-avoidance logic, as they tend to assign more responsibility to the regional authorities the more pessimistic they are about the economic conditions.

Second, empirical findings also show that Euroscepticism moderates the effect of economic evaluations upon responsibility assignments more prominently in countries with old EU membership. Eurosceptic individuals are more likely to assign responsibility following a blame-attribution logic: when they hold negative views about the economy they are more likely to assign responsibility to the out-group, namely European authorities. This attribution pattern is more prominent in countries with longer EU membership. We argue that in those countries European institutions are more visible

for citizens and, in consequence, are more likely to become a target for individuals' strategic responsibility attribution.

This paper helps to advance the current literature in several ways. First, it provides evidence of a 'selective attribution' bias with cross-country data, a comparative approach that has been absent in an area of research dominated by case studies. Second, it develops and tests some theoretical insights into the role of multilevel institutions – namely federalism – in moderating the impact of cognitive bias in responsibility attribution, bridging two strands of the literature that have so far rarely spoken to each other (institutional and cognitive bias). Third, the paper hypothesizes and tests about the nature of the out-group to become a 'blameable' or 'creditable' actor in responsibility assignments. More specifically, it argues that a specific group (level of government) is more likely to become a target for strategic responsibility assignments when it holds some degree of power or responsibilities (as in regional governments in federal states) or when it is a more visible and established level of government (as in the European level for old EU members).

Finally, the empirical results prompt some questions on the relationship between responsibility attribution and accountability. As shown, cognitive biases distort the link between outcomes and the responsible level of government. Individuals are not neutral when it comes to assigning responsibility for the most important issues in their countries: their responsibility judgements are conditioned by their evaluations of economic outcomes, their political beliefs and feelings about the EU. In essence, individuals' cognitive biases in responsibility assignments may contribute to stress the 'vice' of multilevel governance for electoral accountability: the distortion of the link between outcomes and the responsible level of government that is crucial to hold governments to account.



## **Acknowledgements**

Previous versions of this paper were presented at the 2014 European Election Studies Conference celebrated at the University of Mannheim in November 2015, the 2014 APSA Annual Meeting, the 2016 EPSA Annual Meeting, the 2017 MPSA Annual Meeting, and seminars at the European University Institute, the University of York, and the University of Cologne. We thank their participants for helpful comments and suggestions, as well as this WEP Special Issue editors and anonymous reviewers.

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## TABLES

**Table 1: Economic Evaluations and Attribution of Responsibility**

	Ref. Category: National Level		Ref. Category: National Level		Ref. Category: National Level	
	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level
National Gov. Should Deal with MIP	-1.873*** (0.131)	-0.821*** (0.0932)	-1.885*** (0.134)	-0.807*** (0.104)	-1.871*** (0.131)	-0.818*** (0.0935)
Europe Should Deal with MIP	-1.442*** (0.113)	1.091*** (0.0797)	-1.450*** (0.118)	1.075*** (0.0865)	-1.427*** (0.112)	1.106*** (0.081)
Informed	-0.00386 (0.0104)	-0.0247*** (0.00822)	-0.00622 (0.0112)	-0.0240*** (0.00867)	-0.00898 (0.00986)	-0.0278*** (0.00814)
Medium Education	0.235** (0.105)	-0.0779 (0.0519)	0.215** (0.0988)	-0.0879* (0.0509)	0.242** (0.104)	-0.0686 (0.0506)
High Education	0.156 (0.126)	-0.268*** (0.0737)	0.127 (0.119)	-0.279*** (0.0752)	0.182 (0.125)	-0.243*** (0.0709)
Age	-0.000690 (0.00131)	-0.00327** (0.00162)	-0.000374 (0.00137)	-0.00295* (0.00165)	-0.000609 (0.00132)	-0.00315* (0.00164)
Gender	0.140*** (0.0452)	0.0232 (0.0278)	0.150*** (0.0467)	0.0251 (0.0286)	0.134*** (0.0453)	0.0187 (0.0278)
2009 wave	0.0394 (0.142)	0.666*** (0.101)	0.119 (0.163)	0.666*** (0.101)	0.0506 (0.142)	0.684*** (0.100)
2014 wave	-0.234 (0.159)	0.125 (0.110)	-0.166 (0.161)	0.117 (0.120)	-0.236 (0.157)	0.121 (0.110)
Bad Economic Evaluations	-0.0446 (0.0356)	-0.0101 (0.0295)	-0.0716* (0.0374)	-0.0295 (0.0320)	-0.0108 (0.0403)	-0.0871** (0.0440)
National Incumbent Partisan			-0.287*** (0.0625)	-0.0389 (0.0431)		
National Inc. Partisan*Bad Eco. Evaluations			0.102 (0.108)	0.0373 (0.0562)		
Eurosceptic					0.207*** (0.0600)	0.0232 (0.0579)
Eurosceptic*Bad Eco. Evaluations					-0.111* (0.0657)	0.164** (0.0759)
Constant	-0.101 (0.250)	-0.669 (0.188)	-0.085 (0.245)	-0.675*** (0.196)	-0.141 (0.242)	0.669*** (0.193)
Year fixed- effects	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	53,698	53,698	48,295	48,295	53,698	53,698

Standard errors are clustered by country. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1



**Table 2: Attribution of Responsibility in Federal and Non-Federal Countries.  
Multinomial Logit**

	<b>Non-Federal Countries</b>		<b>Federal Countries</b>	
	Ref. Category: National Level		Ref. Category: National Level	
	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level
National Incumbent Partisan	-0.266*** (0.067)	-0.039 (0.052)	-0.322*** (0.090)	-0.018 (0.081)
Bad Economic Evaluation	-0.089** (0.040)	-0.008 (0.032)	0.022 (0.033)	-0.093 (0.092)
National Incumbent Partisan*	-0.004 (0.108)	0.021 (0.061)	0.519*** (0.153)	0.140 (0.122)
Bad Economic Evaluation	-0.108 (0.240)	-0.696*** (0.220)	-0.080 (0.691)	-0.750* (0.421)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed-effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	40,762	40,762	7,533	7,533

Standard errors are clustered by country. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

**Table 3: Attribution of Responsibility by Economic Evaluations.  
Multinomial Logit**

	<b>Bad Economic Evaluations</b>		<b>Rest of voters</b>	
	Ref. Category: National Level		Ref. Category: National Level	
	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level
National Incumbent Partisan	-0.274*** (0.080)	-0.003 (0.051)	-0.284*** (0.068)	-0.067 (0.052)
Federal Country	0.177 (0.144)	0.133 (0.121)	-0.112 (0.210)	0.182 (0.173)
National Incumbent Partisan	0.493*** (0.145)	0.129 (0.114)	-0.0342 (0.118)	0.029 (0.084)
*Federal Country	-0.550*** (0.166)	-0.645*** (0.246)	0.317 (0.329)	-0.849*** (0.174)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed-effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	23,021	23,021	25,274	25,274

Standard errors are clustered by country. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

**Table 4: Attribution of Responsibility across Regions in Multilevel Democracies.  
Multinomial Logit**

Model 11		
Ref. category: National Level		
VARIABLES	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level
National Incumbent Partisan	-0.257* (0.153)	-0.136 (0.097)
Non-affiliated region	-0.078 (0.192)	-0.104 (0.166)
National Incumbent Partisan*Non-affiliated region	0.917*** (0.248)	0.251 (0.285)
Constant	1.173** (0.596)	0.350 (0.385)
Controls	✓	✓
Year fixed-effects	✓	✓
Observations	4,140	4,140

Standard errors are clustered by country. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

**Table 5: Attribution of Responsibility in Old and New EU members.  
Multinomial Logit**

<b>Pre-2004 EU countries</b>			<b>Post-2004 EU countries</b>	
Ref. Category: National Level			Ref. Category: National Level	
	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level
Eurosceptic	0.259*** (0.0917)	0.0998 (0.0675)	0.120* (0.0715)	-0.0955 (0.0921)
Bad Economic Evaluation	0.0283 (0.0520)	-0.118** (0.0553)	-0.103* (0.0530)	-0.0436 (0.0719)
Eurosceptic*	-0.168 (0.111)	0.234** (0.101)	-0.0283 (0.0616)	0.0863 (0.106)
Bad Economic Evaluation	-0.340 (0.334)	-0.866*** (0.212)	0.407* (0.210)	-0.500* (0.297)
Constant				
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed-effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	31,430	31,430	22,268	22,268

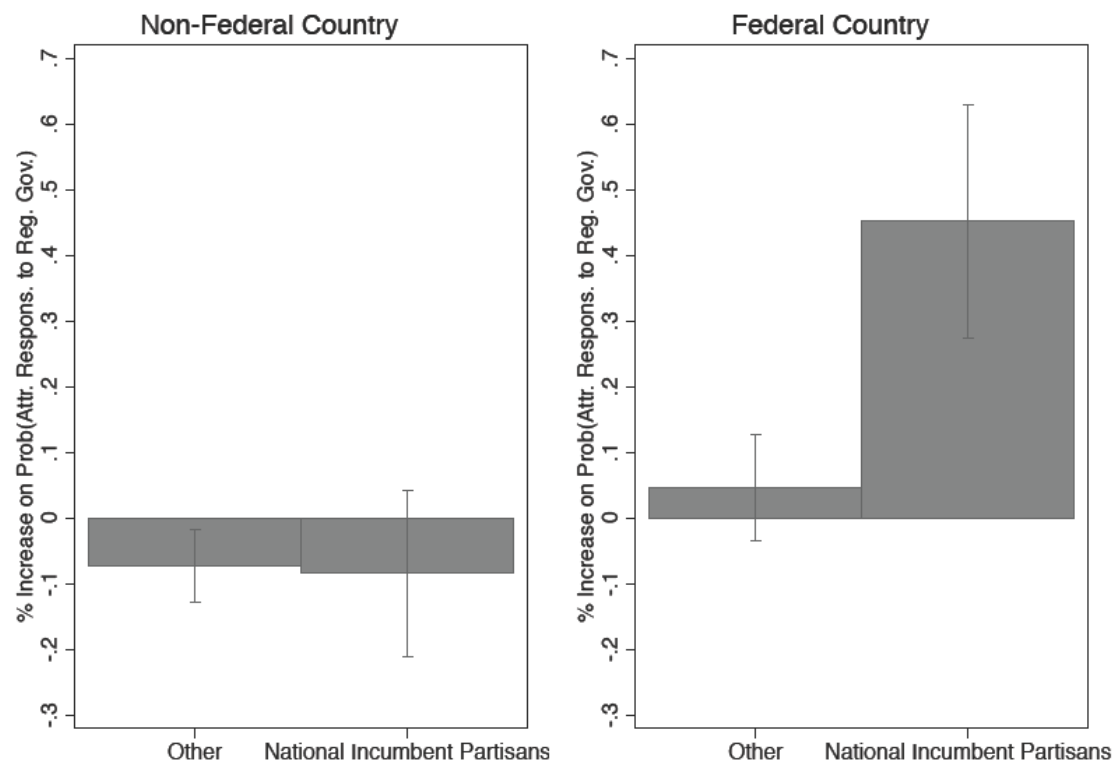
Standard errors are clustered by country. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

**Table 6: Attribution of Responsibility by Economic Evaluations.  
Multinomial Logit**

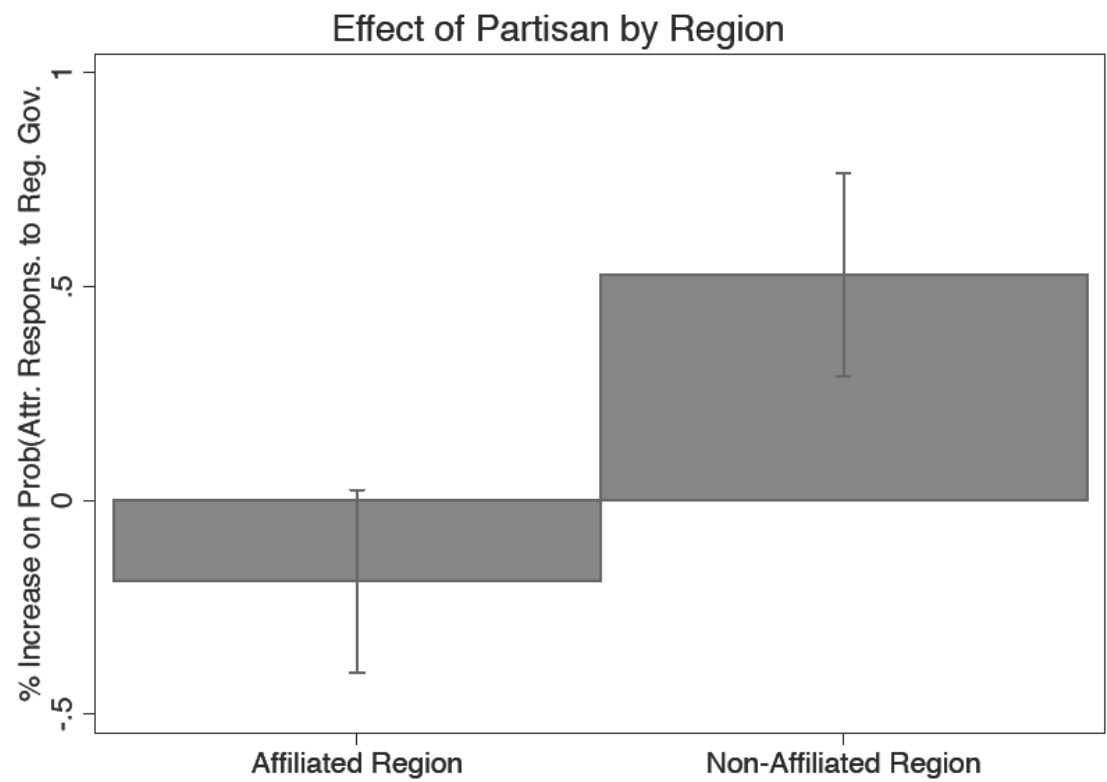
<b>Rest of voters</b>			<b>Bad Economic Evaluations</b>	
Ref. Category: National Level			Ref. Category: National Level	
	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level
Eurosceptic	0.112 (0.0733)	-0.120 (0.0851)	0.0863 (0.0547)	-0.0895 (0.0664)
Pre-2004 EU country	-0.326** (0.142)	0.101 (0.127)	-0.120 (0.144)	-0.0910 (0.134)
Eurosceptic*	0.156 (0.120)	0.290*** (0.104)	0.00819 (0.0896)	0.452*** (0.0941)
Pre-2004 EU country	0.419 (0.315)	-0.942*** (0.172)	-0.294 (0.206)	-0.609*** (0.225)
Constant				
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed-effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	25,657	25,657	28,041	28,041

Standard errors are clustered by country. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

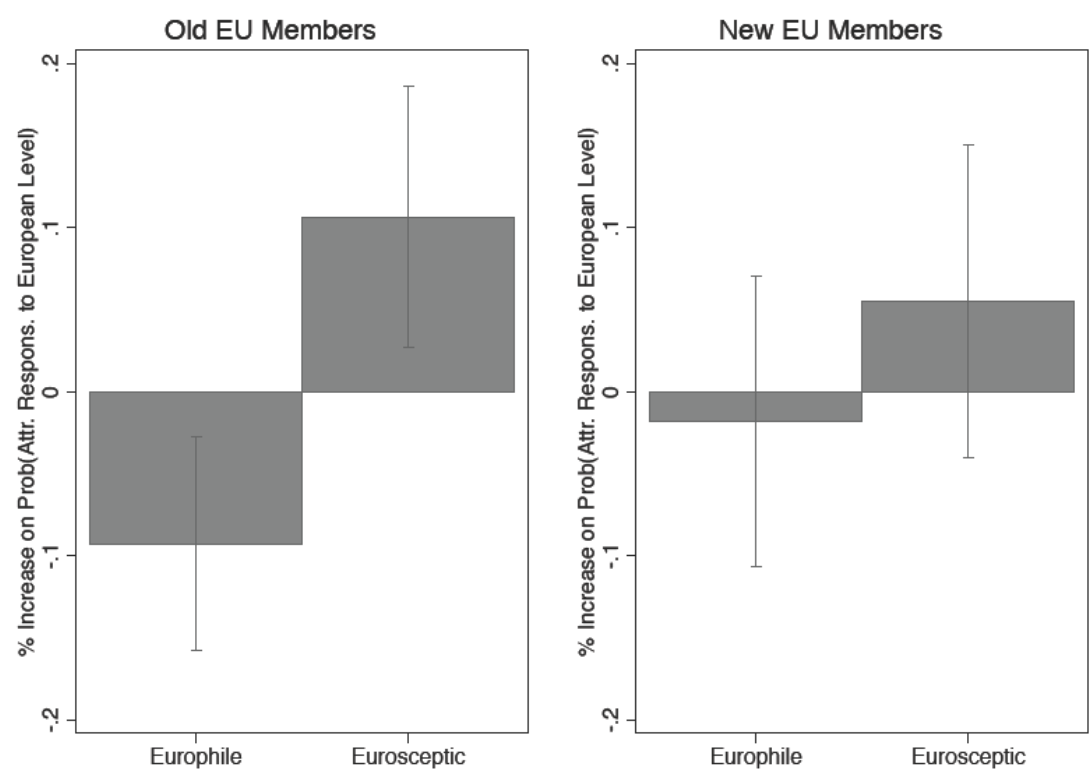
**Figure 1: Effect of Partisanship on Attribution of Responsibility in Federal and Non-Federal Countries**



**Figure 2. Effect of Partisanship on Responsibility Attribution by Types of Regions**



**Figure 3. Effect of Euroscepticism on Attribution of Responsibility in Old and New EU members**



## ONLINE APPENDIX

**Table A1: Distribution of the dependent variable by institutional contexts**

Who deals with MIPS	Total 2004-2014	% 2004-2014	% Federal 2004-2014	% Non-federal 2004-2014	% Old EU members 2004-2014	% New EU members 2004-2014
Regional	9,893	15.72	15.00	15.85	15.84	15.54
National	37,917	60.24	54.76	61.26	58.91	62.07
European	15,136	24.04	30.23	22.88	25.24	22.38
Total	62,946	100	100	100	100	100

**Table A2: Attribution of Responsibility in Federal and Non-Federal Countries.  
Multinomial Logit. Only Economic MIPs**

	<b>Non-Federal Countries</b>		<b>Federal Countries</b>	
	Ref. Category: National Level		Ref. Category: National Level	
	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level
National Incumbent Partisan	-0.224** (0.0965)	0.0389 (0.0639)	-0.181* (0.110)	-0.0833 (0.140)
Bad Economic Evaluation	-0.00841 (0.0547)	0.0276 (0.0495)	0.0906*** (0.0143)	-0.0990 (0.142)
National Incumbent Partisan*	-0.00414 (0.130)	-0.0467 (0.0806)	0.392** (0.180)	0.212 (0.165)
Bad Economic Evaluation	-0.205 (0.340)	-0.498 (0.338)	-0.0273 (0.654)	-0.677 (0.550)
Constant				
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed-effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	23,936	23,936	4,491	4,491

Standard errors are clustered by country. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

**Table A3: Attribution of Responsibility by Economic Evaluations.  
Multinomial Logit. Only Economic MIPs**

	<b>Bad Economic Evaluations</b>		<b>Rest of voters</b>	
	Ref. Category: National Level		Ref. Category: National Level	
	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level
National Incumbent Partisan	-0.246*** (0.0946)	0.0142 (0.0660)	-0.226** (0.107)	0.00616 (0.0638)
Federal Country	0.00388 (0.165)	0.186 (0.151)	0.232* (0.132)	0.145 (0.138)
National Incumbent Partisan *Federal Country	0.0772 (0.148)	-0.108 (0.144)	0.472*** (0.180)	0.163 (0.159)
Constant	0.177 (0.437)	-0.497 (0.317)	-0.439* (0.254)	-0.564* (0.342)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed-effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	12,010	12,010	16,417	16,417

Standard errors are clustered by country. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1



**Table A4: Attribution of Responsibility in old and new European Union members.  
Multinomial Logit. Only Economic MIPs**

	Pre-2004 EU countries		Post-2004 EU countries	
	Ref. Category: National Level		Ref. Category: National Level	
	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level
Eurosceptic	0.0671 (0.0901)	0.0570 (0.0694)	0.145 (0.0990)	-0.0290 (0.0881)
Bad Economic Evaluation	0.00213 (0.0734)	-0.121* (0.0625)	-0.0549 (0.0725)	0.0164 (0.0763)
Eurosceptic * Bad Economic Evaluation	0.0360 (0.130)	0.267** (0.107)	-0.0107 (0.0860)	-0.00437 (0.0792)
Constant	-0.486 (0.462)	-0.455 (0.296)	0.567* (0.324)	-0.639 (0.403)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed-effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	17,467	17,467	14,217	14,217

Standard errors are clustered by country. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

**Table A5: Attribution of Responsibility by Economic Evaluations.  
Multinomial Logit. Only Economic MIPs**

	Bad Economic Evaluations		Rest of voters	
	Ref. Category: National Level		Ref. Category: National Level	
	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level	Attrib. Resp. Regional Level	Attrib. Resp. European Level
Eurosceptic	0.133 (0.104)	-0.0564 (0.0864)	0.119 (0.0748)	-0.120 (0.0862)
Pre-2004 EU Member	-0.347** (0.152)	0.154 (0.141)	-0.222 (0.162)	-0.109 (0.158)
Eurosceptic * Pre-2004 EU Member	-0.0473 (0.136)	0.193* (0.107)	-0.0200 (0.136)	0.481*** (0.120)
Constant	0.472 (0.450)	-0.627** (0.257)	-0.0614 (0.291)	-0.493* (0.284)
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓
Year fixed-effects	✓	✓	✓	✓
Observations	13,416	13,416	18,268	18,268

Standard errors are clustered by country. \*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1